Animal cruelty and human violence: The veterinarian's role in making the connection — The American experience

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A decade ago, stories of cruelty to animals and violence against humans attracted little media attention and were not a significant part of American popular culture. There was comparatively little professional interest in the topic, aside from the animal care and control community, and only limited discussion of the issue within the professions most directly affected by the abuse of animals and its links to other forms of violence — namely mental health, criminal justice, and veterinary medicine (1).

The situation has changed dramatically in recent years. Serious cruelty to animal cases receive national attention in the United States and Canada. A recent incident of "road rage" in California involving a bichon frise thrown into traffic by an irate motorist launched a national manhunt and rewards in excess of $120 000. Similarly, the case of a 13-year-old girl in Saskatoon charged in connection with a series of cat mutilations attracted attention throughout North America. Many factors are responsible for this shift:

First, there is stronger scientific evidence for the connection between cruelty to animals and violence against humans (2–4). Although much of this data existed well before 1980, it attracted little attention until popularized by animal advocacy groups, social service workers, and the growing public fascination with the life histories of violent offenders. Second, public interest in cruelty to animals is a natural corollary of its growing concern about the overall proliferation of violence in society and a strong movement to finding effective tools for identifying victims and perpetrators of violence at the earliest stages of abuse. Finally, interest in the connection between cruelty to animals and violence against humans has been strengthened by the practical validity of paying attention to the maltreatment of animals when confronting violence against humans: Law enforcement officers benefit by taking the actions of animal abusers seriously, social workers and mental health professionals get useful information by asking clients about the treatment of family pets, and therapists seeking interventions that will build empathy and develop nonviolent skills see the benefits of fostering compassion for animals.

Professionals other than humane agents and animal care and control workers have begun to take interest in these connections in recent years. Indicators of this change in the mental health and law enforcement communities are the inclusion of cruelty to animals in the diagnostic criteria for conduct disorder (5), the widespread distribution of material on cruelty to animals by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (6), and substantial inclusion of material on the subject in the "Jumpstart" training program for newly appointed prosecutors, which was launched in 1998 by the National Association of District Attorneys and the American Prosecutors Research Institute.

Similar law enforcement interest in Canada is seen in the omnibus bill (Bill C-17), introduced in December of 1999 after voluminous expression of public interest, that would raise the maximum penalty for intentional cruelty to animals to 5 years in prison, remove existing limits on fines, and permit judges to prohibit ownership of animals by anyone convicted of cruelty. This legislation would also give judges authority to order restitution to veterinarians and animal welfare organizations that care for the victims of abuse.

In the United States, veterinary involvement in the cruelty to animals/violence against humans issue has been comparatively slow to build but is attracting increasing attention. The topic has been addressed sporadically in the veterinary literature over the last decade, usually by nonveterinarians (1,7–10), and there have been first-hand accounts of the treatment of animal injuries associated with suspicions of other ongoing violence or the potential for violence (11,12). Landau (13) surveyed the deans of 31 American and Canadian schools of veterinary medicine to assess the veterinarian's role in recognizing and reporting animal abuse. Of these, 97% agreed that veterinarians would encounter instances of intentional animal abuse and 63% agreed that veterinary professionals would encounter cases of cruelty to animals associated with family violence. Thirty-one percent of deans reported that their schools had a policy requiring the reporting of suspected animal abuse; 2 of these policies have been discussed in the literature (8,14). However, based on inquiries received by The Humane Society of the United States, many veterinary students feel that the issue is inadequately addressed in their

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training. This is consistent with Landau's finding (13) that only 17% of deans reported that students are explicitly made aware of policies on responding to suspected abuse, and her estimate that an average of only **8 minutes** is spent in the veterinary curriculum on the issue of cruelty to animals and human violence.

In a survey of small animal practitioners in the United States, Sharpe (15) estimated that the average practitioner saw 5.6 cases of animal abuse per 1000 patients, with location of the practice (rural, urban, suburban) having little effect. She reported that only 8% of the 368 respondents felt that they had received adequate training in general prevention of abuse and fewer than 44% thought that they adequately understood their rights and responsibilities, when responding to suspected animal or human abuse.

The importance of veterinary involvement in responding to instances of suspected abuse to animals and humans has been made by several authors (2,8,16–18), but it is clear that veterinary professionals are uncertain about the role that they can and should play. They are several reasons for this:

First, there is no widely agreed upon standard for identifying an injury or other condition in a veterinary patient as being the result of intentional abuse or extreme neglect. In many ways, veterinary professionals are working in an environment that is similar to that of pediatricians prior to the efforts of Kempe et al (19) to define the "battered child syndrome." Several veterinarians have emphasized the need to establish a similar body of data for animals (20–24). As a result, veterinary involvement in such cases is most common when there is unequivocal evidence of intentional harm.

Second, veterinarians are trained to base diagnostic assessments, in part, on the facts presented to them by their clients, who are generally truthful. They are often not prepared to deal with a client's history that is intentionally misleading. Also, like their pediatric counterparts of the 1960s, many veterinarians seem reluctant to believe that a client who intentionally harmed an animal in his or her care would seek medical treatment for these injuries.

Third, when confronted with suspected cases of intentional abuse, and possible abuse of human family members, veterinary professionals may be legitimately concerned about the safety of themselves or their staff, if the suspected perpetrator is confronted about these suspicions. At the very least, they may have a reasonable fear of losing a client; developing a poor reputation in the community; or facing possible litigation, if they act on their suspicions.

Finally, the legal mandates and protections regarding veterinary response to suspected abuse in the United States are currently both inconsistent and poorly publicized or incorporated into basic or continuing education. The 1999 Animal Welfare Position of the American Veterinary Medical Association states, "The AVMA recognizes that veterinarians may have occasion to observe cases of cruelty to animals, animal abuse, or animal neglect as defined by state or local ordinances. When these observations occur, the AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report such cases to the appropriate authorities. Such disclosures may be necessary to protect the health and welfare of animals and people" (25).

Currently such reporting of suspected cruelty to animals is specifically required in only a few states, including West Virginia, Minnesota, and Alabama. Other states (Arizona, Wisconsin, and California) only mandate veterinarians to report suspected abuse related to dogfighting. Some states (Idaho, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, New Jersey, California, Florida, Arizona) encourage the reporting of abuse by providing immunity for veterinary professionals who make good-faith reports. This approach is increasingly popular, since it provides a good foundation for veterinary response to cruelty.

Veterinary mandates to report suspected human abuse are even more fragmented. The growing recognition of the significant overlap of child abuse and cruelty to animals (26,27) contributed to growing interest in the cross-training of animal care and control professionals to report suspected child abuse and neglect. Such reporting is mandated in California for state humane officers (cruelty investigators) and animal control officers. The mandate for veterinarians in that state is unclear, since veterinarians are not specifically listed among the mandated professions, but they could be construed to be mandated under the general rule for licensed health practitioners. According to the San Francisco Council on Child Abuse (personal communication, L. Loar), child protection officials do not generally consider veterinarians to be mandated reporters in California and have no records of professional referrals made by such practitioners, nor of any actions taken against a veterinarian for failing to report. Colorado appears to be the only state clearly mandating veterinarians to report child abuse, but not cruelty to animals. In 1999, Illinois became the first state to add veterinarians to its list of professionals mandated to report suspected abuse, neglect, or exploitation of the elderly. This complex landscape is further complicated by the fact that in about half of the states in the United States, **all adults** are considered mandated (and protected) reporters of suspected child abuse, regardless of profession.

The association of abuse to animals with the dynamic of domestic violence has been well documented (28). Given the prevalence of domestic violence and the frequency of cruelty to animals associated with such abuse, it is virtually certain that most companion animal practitioners have one or more clients whose pets have been injured or killed in the context of spousal abuse. However, unlike the requirements for reporting of suspected animal, child, or elder abuse, the legislative assumption in the United States has been that victims of domestic violence are capable of disclosing their victimization to authorities and any mandates, when present, are usually limited to medical professionals who gain direct evidence of domestic violence in the conduct of their responsibilities.

Public support for strong and rapid response to cruelty to animals and its associated family violence continues to grow. As of August 2000, 31 states and the District of Columbia in the United States have felony provisions in their cruelty to animal codes making some forms of intentional abuse punishable by large fines and prison sentences of up to 10 years. This represents a dramatic

increase from only 5 states with such provisions a decade ago. It is certain that veterinarians, as key advocates for animals in society, will increasingly be expected to respond to these concerns. Also, as Rollin (8) notes, "... as health care professionals with an obligation to public health and welfare, they must act to ferret out those individuals likely to move from animal abuse to human abuse, particularly child abuse."

There are many opportunities for veterinary professionals to become active in helping their communities creatively to address the overlapping circles of family and community violence:

- Playing a key role in the investigation and documentation of cruelty to animals
- As expert witnesses in the prosecution of cruelty to animals
- As "sentinels" for other forms of societal violence, particularly child abuse, domestic violence, and elder abuse
- As participants in multidisciplinary response teams and "safe haven" programs that provide emergency shelter and care for the pets of victims of domestic violence
- As participants and instructors in cross-training with social service and animal care and control professionals on the recognition of animal abuse and neglect
- As supporters of and participants in animal-oriented prevention and intervention programs for at-risk populations

Violence affects all of us, either directly as victims or as friends or family of victims, or indirectly as citizens who must bear the costs of law enforcement and social service systems that try to prevent or respond to the interconnected webs of victims and perpetrators. The goal of the humane movement has always been to work at the roots of these problems and to foster an ethic of compassion that extends beyond individual, family, racial, political, and species barriers. As professionals who already have extended their interest and concerns in this way, veterinarians are well suited to play a central role in helping to find creative approaches to address violence in society and provide healing that extends far beyond the animals in their care.

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